

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 18, 2002

The Honorable Joe Skeen
Chairman
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior
B308 Rayburn HOB
Washington, D.C. 20515-6016

Dear Chairman Skeen:

As you begin work on the 2003 Interior Appropriations Subcommittee bill, we would appreciate your consideration of \$5 million in funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund for purchase of lands by the Fish and Wildlife Service for the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge in Texas.

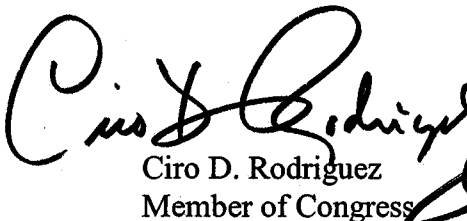
The counties of the Lower Rio Grande Valley are among the poorest in the nation with double-digit poverty and unemployment rates. Continued expansion of the National Wildlife Refuge is critical to economic development activity for the region. Nature tourism, or ecotourism, acts as one of the few major economic engines in South Texas. The Refuge has created jobs and economic opportunity for an otherwise struggling region. It is estimated that wildlife watching accounts for over \$170 million in local annual economic impact and sustains over 2,000 jobs.

South Texas counties have clearly recognized the economic value of ecotourism -- primarily birding -- and have invested heavily in its future. The state, municipal, and private sector commitment to the World Birding Center and similar ecotourism facilities and activities presently is in excess of \$35 million. Nowhere else in the nation has anywhere near such a commitment been made. But to ultimately be successful, we must have the birds and other wildlife that make such an industry possible, and to have the wildlife, we must have the habitat to sustain it.

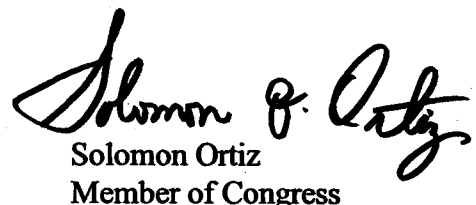
Congress established the National Wildlife Refuge in 1979. Since that time, the Fish and Wildlife Service has been purchasing appropriate land from willing sellers to expand the refuge. Urban sprawl in the Valley, which also is one of the fastest growing areas in the country, is absorbing land at a frightful pace, and forcing prices upward. It is imperative we protect the best and most necessary habitat now, while it still is available at affordable prices. The return on investment makes it one of the most attractive imaginable uses of federal dollars. When completed, the Refuge will protect important natural ecosystems, preserve South Texas' astonishing biological diversity, and provide an essential stimulus to one of the poorest regions in the country.

We appreciate any assistance you can provide in funding this request.

Sincerely,


Cyrus D. Rodriguez
Member of Congress


Rubén Hinojosa
Member of Congress


Solomon B. Ortiz
Member of Congress